The Language of Halakhah

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Judaism is not a civilization.[1]

It is a way of life.

Halakhah is its guidebook. Halakhah, from the root meaning "to walk," sets out the way to walk, the path, the Tao of Judaism.

How does one describe or instantiate that way of life? Let us begin as observers. Living halakhah, one's life is divided and structured by a Jewish flow of time, each week moving toward Shabbat, the day that Abraham Joshua Heschel describes as a "palace in time."[2] Each week begins with workaday vigor but by midweek has begun its inexorable turn toward awareness of Shabbat. Perfunctory emails sent on Wednesday or Thursday end reflexively with "Shabbat shalom." And Shabbat itself is a day spent at home or in synagogue, in family and community, aware of the Torah and pleasures of reading and thought, unplugged, a bit removed from the hurly-burly of the news and greater tensions outside. Together, they share a language of Torah and mitzvot that marks the community as unlike any other.

The year is likewise marked by the Jewish holidays. As I write, in the month of Adar, those who are living halakhah are oriented to the coming holiday of Purim and looming requirements of Pesaḥ. Come fall, the High Holidays will figure prominently in their consciousness. For better or worse, Tishah b'Av interrupts summer's reverie, for Jewish time overwrites the world's other patterns.

Judaism speaks of kashrut, and, for those who adhere to it, that food discipline completely transforms their lives. It structures their every shopping experience by accustoming them to the products they buy and those they do not. It affects what restaurants they frequent and which are beyond their experience, and how they negotiate those they enter. Living in this way is rarely experienced as a constraint. It is, simply put, a way of life.

Again, depending on how thickly you incorporate halakhah into your life, each day may be punctuated by acknowledgments of God's place in the universe through blessings and prayer, and the mezuzah on the door.

[1] Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (Thomas Yoseloff, 1934) insisted it was best understood that way.

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

It is likely that the art in your home, the books on your shelves, the very visual environment surrounding your every day is distinctively Jewish—and shared by others in your community, although there is no halakhah requiring that. This is the stuff of thick belonging. It is the product of the halakhah we live and are taught in our homes, in our synagogues, and through our associations.

This is not a necessary life pattern. It is a choice. And different in untold regards from another life.

So why live this life, when, in our emancipated reality, other options exist before us?

There are, broadly speaking, two answers to that question.

The first and strongest is the belief that God gave us the Torah—or at very least that it represents the teaching that He has inspired in us. The Torah, with all of its family stories and national history, is nothing if not clear about its message: God has ordained a way that we should live, has commanded us mitzvot and adjures us to follow them and not to transgress them. In the words of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9), because we love God and cling to Him, we choose to adopt the words of Torah as our life, to live by them, to speak of them, and to teach them to our children. This way of life, this complex of mitzvot, this halakhah woven through our existence is who we are, or choose to be.

If/since God created the universe and is the sole source of its meaning, there can be no higher human purpose than to fulfill in our lives that which God intends and fervently wishes that we do. Our presence here is precisely in order to fulfill the role of furthering His creation through our action, as guided by the Torah, mitzvot, and halakhah—our ordained way of life.

Can this be true? Do we not have a human purpose, a different task—namely, to pursue the good of every human being? Of course that is our task, but it is not a *different* task. It is part of the divine path, to be acted upon within the ambit of our daily lives lived *ʿal haderekh*, or "on the path." The fourteenth-century sage Jacob Bar Asher starts one of the four sections of his law code, known as the Tur, with this declaration: "May the Holy One's Name be praised, for He is eager for the welfare of His creatures" (*Arbaʿah Turim*, *Even haʿezer* 1:1). As this is God's will, it is part of our purpose.

Halakhah, as it has been developed over the ages, is intended to answer in every situation the question answered more generally by the prophet Micah: "What does God seek from you?" (Micah 6:8).[3] Answering that

[3] A similar question, less often quoted, is asked in Deuteronomy 6:12: "Israel, what does God ask of you?"

question broadly, and as fully aware of its implications as possible, generations of halakhists (known also as *posqim*, "decisors") have grappled with these questions. And we, those who choose to live the life of halakhah, the life of *Torah umitsvot*, have sought to incorporate their thoughts, decisions, and rulings into the daily life that we live. That is the strong answer, and for those who can commit to the belief statement at its core, who believe that the Torah is God's instruction manual and commandment for us, it imbues this way of life with sanctity and incomparable meaning. And that meaning is reinforced and supported by a community of like-minded adherents speaking together the language of Torah, the language of halakhah.

There is yet another, less potent answer to the question of why choose to live this life. By referring to this approach as "less potent," I mean not to denigrate it but simply to describe it. This second answer speaks the language of emotional affinity, of comfort and meaning and self-fulfillment. It is available to those who do not or cannot subscribe to the first approach. The reason to choose to live within this community, then, to choose this way of life, is that it is supportive and warm and rich, that it embeds you within a community that you know shares its values and its identity with you. This is something that other lifestyles may not offer. Recall that any other way of life is challenged by the selfsame question of why choose to live this way. It is not self-evident that any other way of life offers a richer life.

The primary way people find their place in such a community and find themselves drawn to live their lives in this way is through their upbringing. Raised in such a family and community, it seems natural and comfortable—right and affirming and somehow sacred, if not quite divine—to continue in the ways that were modeled for us and that we so appreciate, and in turn to offer these to our children, whom we hope will want to be our continuers. This is the sense in which the Conservative Movement's name is precisely correct. It is the sentiment of *Fiddler on the Roof*'s "Tradition." If, looking around you, you see no comparable life that might offer you more (but only less), and you feel the warmth of your community and upbringing, then even without the conviction of God's direction, this life that you know and cherish recommends itself as the life to choose to live.

But a not insignificant number of people arrive at this place of their own intellectual search or the encounters they have with this world. The many Hillel and Chabad houses on university campuses pitch themselves to precisely these young Jews who may find direction, meaning, community, and warmth at their Shabbat meals and programs and choose to mold their lives toward an observant life. Some of these may find their way to belief, but

others will choose this way of life because it is fulfilling, thick and intense and warm and affirming. That, too, is fine.

The truth is, though, that the Conservative Movement has not excelled at drawing in members through this door. More often it draws adherents through the pathway. of love and family. The other group of people who choose to live the thick life of mitzvot are the spouses and children of those already committed to the life of Jewish observance, who bring their chosen families with them into their Jewish life. These people may convert, which our communities welcome, or, increasingly they may not, while still choosing to raise a Jewish family within the world of synagogue, holidays, and even kashrut. These, too, choose to live the Jewish way of life and seek to perpetuate it by teaching it to their children by living the life and speaking the language of mitzvot.

I write these words as a long-standing member of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS). The CJLS represents the Conservative Movement's iteration of Judaism's continuing commitment to the ongoing progress of halakhah. In the past, individual rabbis who were recognized (in some amorphous way) as masters of Jewish law, sought on their own, and in response to the questions raised by the community, to consider the continually changing face of reality and new twists of events, to determine what halakhah—what the Jewish path—should be in such new circumstances. These judgments were then catalogued and passed along, becoming the newest face of the halakhic way. The Conservative Movement judged, perhaps in light of newer democratic ideas, that fresher, more foresighted rulings would come from many individuals than from a single mind, so it established a committee, today consisting of twenty-five rabbis and several lay participants, to respond to halakhic questions.

But CJLS does not teach halakhah directly to the Conservative Movement.[4] It is an advisory body whose opinions, although available to all, are regularly conveyed to the Movement's rabbis. It is they who lead the discourse of a Jewish lifestyle in their communities and congregations by modeling, speaking, and teaching halakhah and mitzvot. That is as it should be. For that is where Jewish life is lived, where the community chooses to share its identity, its values and commitments, and Torah and halakhah find their purpose. In living an observant Jewish life, we feel rich and happy

[4] There has been an attempt of late to push CJLS to undertake the teaching function in order to popularize its rulings. That project may succeed, or it may fail. It is not there but in our congregations and communities under the tutelage of their rabbis that the Jewish way of life shall extend across generations.

with our lives. As Ben Zoma taught, "Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot" (איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו, Pirkei Avot 4:1).

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